



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**ISOLATION AND CHARACTERIZATION OF A FULL-LENGTH  
KNOTTED GENE FROM OIL PALM (ELAEIS GUINEENSIS JACQ.)**

**CHE RADZIAH BT. CHE MOHD. ZAIN.**

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**By**

**CHE RADZIAH BT. CHE MOHD. ZAIN**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in  
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**Chairman: Ho Chai Ling, PhD**

**Faculty: Biotechnology and Biomolecular Sciences**

The oil palm is one of the most important commercial oil crops that produces high quality of oil and with it comes an increasing global demand for this crop. The clonal oil palm produced by tissue culture technique provides an opportunity to expand productivity in order to fulfill the vast demand. However a number of reports have documented the occurrence of abnormalities in clonal oil palm such as vegetative abnormalities of tissue-cultured plantlets and also abnormalities of flowers. There has been no fundamental understanding of the cause of these abnormalities. Since the tissues and organs of plants originate from apical meristems, it is worthwhile to study the molecular mechanism underlying organ morphogenesis from this undifferentiated meristem cells. Within the past several years, there are several lines of evidence indicating that the homeobox genes control pattern formation and morphological structure determinations in multicellular eukaryotes including plants. In this study, *Knotted* homeobox gene was identified and isolated in order to develop an understanding of the function of this gene during oil palm development. In order to isolate the full-length *Knotted* homeobox gene



from oil palm, an oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis* Jacq.) suspension culture cDNA library of was screened with a partial cDNA clone (putative oil palm *Knotted* gene). From the screening, the full-length of oil palm *Knotted* homeobox gene was isolated and designated as oil palm *Knotted* homeobox gene (*OPKNI*). This thesis describes the first homeobox gene isolated from oil palm. Sequence analysis showed that *OPKNI* belongs to the class-1 *Knotted* gene family. Expression study by semi-quantitative RT-PCR, northern blot as well as *in situ* hybridization analyses proved that *OPKNI* gene was expressed in both vegetative and floral meristems suggesting a function in both phases of development. Based on semi-quantitative RT-PCR analyses, *OPKNI* was shown to be expressed in all meristem-based tissues including shoot apex, both male and female floral meristems, embryogenic callus, and suspension cell cultures. This seems to indicate that *OPKNI* may play role in meristem organization and later in morphogenesis processes. This can be supported by the presence of *OPKNI* transcript in leaf primordia suggesting that it may play roles in the development of pinnate leaf in oil palm. The presence of *OPKNI* throughout the flower development in both normal and abnormal flowers also indicates that the gene is active during floral development, suggesting a function in floral morphogenesis. Furthermore, the differences in temporal and spatial expression of *OPKNI* in different stages and type of meristem tissues may cause error in organ determination.



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**PEMENCILAN DAN PENCIRIAN JUJUKAN LENGKAP *KNOTTED GEN*  
DALAM KELAPA SAWIT (*ELAEIS GUINEENSIS JACQ.*)**

Oleh

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Kelapa sawit adalah salah satu daripada tanaman komersial penting yang menghasilkan minyak yang bermutu tinggi. Ini menyebabkan peningkatan global terhadap permintaan tanaman sawit. Kelapa sawit klonal yang dihasilkan melalui teknik kultura tisu memberi peluang bagi meningkatkan produktiviti bagi memenuhi permintaan yang pesat ini. Walau bagaimanapun, terdapat laporan-laporan yang melaporkan kelapa sawit klonal yang luarbiasa dari segi vegetatif dan pembungaan. Sehingga kini, sebab kejadian luar biasa ini masih tidak difahami secara asas. Oleh kerana tisu dan organ tumbuhan berasal daripada meristem apical, maka adalah berguna untuk mengkaji mekanisma molekular yang bertanggungjawab untuk morfogenesis daripada sel meristem yang belum membeza. Sejak beberapa tahun yang lepas, terdapat bukti-bukti yang menunjukkan bahawa gen 'homeobox' mengawal pembentukan dan morfologi struktur dalam pelbagai eukariot termasuk tumbuhan. Dalam kajian ini, gen 'Knotted homeobox' telah pun dikenalpasti dan dipencil untuk pemahaman fungsi gen ini semasa perkembangan kelapa sawit.



Untuk pemencilan jujukan lengkap gen *Knotted* homeobox daripada kelapa sawit, penyaringan perpustakaan cDNA kultur sel suspensi kelapa sawit dijalankan dengan menggunakan klon cDNA separa lengkap. Daripada penyaringan ini, jujukan lengkap gen *Knotted* homeobox telah dipencilkan dan dinamakan sebagai 'oil palm Knotted homeobox gene' (*OPKNI*). Tesis ini menerangkan gen homeobox buat pertama kalinya daripada kelapa sawit. Analisis jujukan menunjukkan bahawa *OPKNI* berasal daripada keluarga gen 'Knotted class I'. Kajian penzahiran menggunakan analisis RT-PCR separa kuantitatif, 'northern blot' dan 'in situ hybridization' membuktikan bahawa *OPKNI* dizahirkan di dalam meristem pucuk dan bunga, mencadangkan fungsinya di dalam kedua-dua fasa perkembangan tersebut. Berdasarkan kepada analisis RT-PCR separa kuantitatif, *OPKNI* dizahirkan di dalam semua tisu berasaskan meristem termasuk apeks pucuk, meristem bunga jantan dan betina, kalus embriogenik dan kultur sel suspensi. Ini menunjukkan *OPKNI* memainkan peranan di dalam organisasi meristem dan kemudian proses morfogenesis. Fakta ini disokong dengan kehadiran transkrip *OPKNI* di dalam primordia daun lalu mencadangkan ia mungkin berperanan untuk perkembangan daun pinate kelapa sawit. Kehadiran *OPKNI* sepanjang perkembangan bunga normal dan luar biasa juga menunjukkan bahawa gen ini aktif semasa perkembangan bunga, lalu mencadangkan fungsinya di dalam morfogenesis bunga. Tambahan pula, perbezaan penzahiran secara 'temporal dan spatial' *OPKNI* di dalam tahap dan jenis tisu meristem mungkin menyebabkan kesilapan dalam penentuan organ.

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Universiti Putra Malaysia, Nov 2004.



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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for equations and citations, which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.



CHE RADZIAH BT. CHE MOHD. ZAIN

Date: 29 OCT 2004

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
ABSTRACT	ii
ABSTRAK	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
APPROVAL	vii
DECLARATION	ix
LIST OF TABLES	xii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiv
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	
<b>CHAPTER</b>	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	4
2.1 Oil Palm ( <i>Elaeis guineensis</i> Jacq.)	4
2.1.1 Taxonomy and Geographic Distribution	4
2.1.2 Economic Importance of Oil Palm and Palm oil	6
2.2 Oil Palm Propagation	14
2.2.1 Biological Characteristic of Oil Palm	14
2.2.2 Conventional Breeding via Seed Production	15
2.2.3 Propagation via Tissue Culture Technique	17
2.2.4 Challenges Related to Tissue Culture Methodology	21
2.3 Some Issues in Plant Development	24
2.3.1 Shoot Apical Meristems (SAM)	25
2.3.2 Gene Expression Regulating Shoot Apical Meristem Function	28
3 MATERIALS AND METHODS	39
3.1 Screening of the Suspension Culture cDNA Library	39
3.1.1 Titering of Phage Library	39
3.1.2 Preparation of Bacterial Culture for Infection	40
3.1.3 Preparation of Filter for cDNA Library Screening	41
3.1.4 Preparation of Probe	42
3.1.5 Prehybridization and Hybridization of Plaque Membranes	44
3.1.6 Selection of Positive Putative Clones	46
3.1.7 Single Clone <i>In-vivo</i> Excision	47
3.2 DNA Sequencing	48
3.3 Southern Blotting Analysis	50
3.4 Northern Blotting Analysis	54
3.5 Southern and Northern Hybridization	58
3.6 Semi-quantitative RT-PCR Analysis	60
3.6.1 First-strand cDNA Analysis	60
3.6.2 PCR Analysis	63
3.7 <i>In situ</i> hybridization Analysis	64



3.7.1	Probe Preparation	64
3.7.2	Tissue Samples Preparation	66
3.7.3	Hybridization	68
3.7.4	Immunological Detection	70
3.8	Histological Analysis	71
4	RESULTS	72
4.1	Screening of the Full-length Knotted-like Gene(s) from Suspension Culture cDNA Library	72
4.2	Sequence Analysis of the <i>OPKNI</i> Clone	75
4.3	<i>OPKNI</i> Gene Belongs to KNOX Class I Genes	78
4.4	Southern Hybridization Analysis	84
4.5	Northern Hybridization Analysis	84
4.6	Semi-quantitative RT-PCR Analysis	90
4.7	<i>In situ</i> Localization of <i>OPKNI</i> Transcripts	96
4.7.1	<i>OPKNI</i> Expression in the Vegetative Tissues	96
4.7.2	<i>OPKNI</i> Expression Pattern during Flower Development	100
5	DISCUSSION	118
5.1	The <i>OPKNI</i> Gene Encodes a KNOX-Family Homeodomain Protein	118
5.2	<i>OPKNI</i> Gene Expressed in Apical-based Tissues	122
5.3	Possible Developmental Roles for <i>OPKNI</i>	126
5.3.1	The Role of <i>OPKNI</i> in the Vegetative Development	127
5.3.2	The Role of <i>OPKNI</i> in the Flower Development	135
6	CONCLUSION	149
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	153
	APPENDICES	163
	VITA	170



## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Tables</b>		<b>Page</b>
2.1	World Supply and Distribution for Palm oil (in million tones)	13
2.2	Some representative class I and class II <i>KNOX</i> genes from monocots and dicots	36



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figures		Page
2.1	An 8 years old oil palm. Some facing fronds have been cut off to show more clearly (1), the central still-unopened fronds (spears), (2) frond no.1, and (3), a male inflorescence in anthesis. Developing fruit bunches can be seen and arrangement of fronds in 8 spirals is shown by the old frond butts on the stem (reproduced from Wood, 1986, p. 2, Figure 1).	5
2.2	Oil yield (in equivalents) for major vegetable oil crops (reproduced form Fairhurst and Mutert, 1999, p. 4, Figure 4).	7
2.3	Harvested area and oil production for major vegetable oil crops (reproduced form Fairhurst and Mutert, 1999, p. 5, Figure 6).	8
2.4	Resource use efficiency for oil palm, soybean and rapeseed (reproduced form Fairhurst and Mutert, 1999, p. 5, Figure 5).	10
2.5	Uses of palm oils and biomass in food and manufacturing industries (reproduced form Fairhurst and Mutert, 1999, p. 4, Figure 3).	12
2.6	Oil palm seed and early growth of seedling A, Longitudinal section of seed through embryo. B, Just germinated seed. C, Median longitudinal section of embryo. D, E, F, G, Successive stages in the early growth of the embryo. H, Production of adventitious roots. I, Four-week-old seedling. J, Section of seed at stage I to show haustorium. C, cap of testa; e, embryo; en, endosperm; f, fibre plug; g, germ pore; h, haustorium; l, ligule; p, petiole; pl, plumule; r, radicle; r', adventitious root; s, shell; I-III, plumular leaves (reproduced from Hartley, 1988, p. 54, Figure 2.1).	16
2.7	Propagation of oil palm by tissue culture (reproduced from Hartley, 1988, p. 283, Figure 5.17).	20
2.8	Classification of oil palm <i>in vitro</i> shoots. (a) rosettes; (b) terminal inflorescence; (c) elongated rosettes; (d) grassy; (e) curly leaves; (f) finger; (g) normal morphotype shoots.	23

- 2.9 Laser scanning confocal microscope optical section of SAM and adjacent floral meristems of wild-type *Arabidopsis*. (A) Original image. FM, floral meristem. (B) Image colored to show typical SAM zonation. CZ, central zone; PZ, peripheral zone; Rib, rib meristem. (C) Image colored to show clonal layers. L1, epidermal layer; L2, subepidermal layer; Corpus, corpus or L3. Scale bar, 50µm (reproduced from Meyerowitz, 1997). 27
- 2.10 Plants exhibiting Knox mutant. A. Double mutant plants have aberrant internode patterning. PNY is a BELL protein interact with *KNAT1*. B. *Kn1* alter leaf morphology when it is expressed in *Arabidopsis* leaves. A normal *Arabidopsis* leaf is in the centre flanked by mutants. C. *Kn1* was originally identified by a dominant leaf phenotype. When this meristem-specific gene is expressed in leaves, the cell continue to grow, resulting in these knots. D. Wild type maize leaf (right) and *Lg-O* maize leaf (left) (reproduce from Hake, 2004; webpage accessed on 22 August 2004). 31
- 2.11 Schematic representation of the three major types of gene expression of *KNOX* genes. The meristem outlined has distichous phyllotaxy. A. *Kn-like* expression throughout the meristem and excluded from Po and the LI layer. B. *Rs1-like* gene expression in the meristem is restricted to positions between the lateral organs. C. *KNOX* gene pattern showing expression throughout the meristem including the LI and Po is similar to *KNOX* expression in tomato (reproduce from Reiser *et al.*, 2000). 32
- 2.12 Diagrammatic illustration of *KNOX* gene structure. The MEINOX (light blue box), ELK (red box), and homeodomain (black box) are underscored. The open triangle represents the position of the conserved intron in class II *KNOX* genes. The close triangle indicates the position of the conserved intron in class I *KNOX* genes (adapted from Reiser *et al.*, 2000). 35
- 4.1 An autoradiograph from (A) primary screening and (B) secondary screening of the oil palm suspension culture cDNA library. Arrows indicate putative positive signals from the primary screening. Circles indicate positive signals from the secondary screening. 73
- 4.2 PCR analysis of putative clones with T3 and T7 primers. M, marker λ *PstI* (A) Clones from primary screening and (B) Clones from secondary screening 74
- 4.3 The nucleotide and deduced amino acid sequence of *OPKNI*. The amino acid residues for *KNOX* domain are in italic bold letter. 76

The ELK and Homeodomain are in italic bold letter with single-underline and double- underline, respectively. Mono-amino stretches in *OPKNI* are in bold letter with broken line. The selected 3' untranslated region (UTR) in shade or in gray was amplified as probe in semi-quantitative RT-PCR and *in situ* hybridization.

- 4.4 Alignment of ELK and homeodomain of *OPKNI* with other previous reported Knotted-like gene. This alignment then was subjected to phylogenetic analysis using PAUP\*4.0 program. GenBank accession numbers of the protein used as follows: KN1 AAP76321; ATK1 A96729; KNAT1 AAA67881; KNAT2 P46640; STM Q9M6D9; SBH1 P46608; HvKNOX3 Q43484; HvH21 AA81079; PKN1 BAA31698; PKN2 BAA31699; PKN3 BAA31701; TKN1 Q41330; TKN2 AAD0025; TKN3 AD00252; TKN4 AAP47027; KNAP1 004134; KNAP2 004135; NTH1 BAA76750; NTH15 T01735; NTH20 BAA76904; NTH9 BAA76903; NTH22 BAA76905; OSH1 P46609; OSH6 BAA79224; OSH15 BAA31688; OSKN3 AAC32818; OSKN2 AAC32817; SKN2 AAD00692; SKN1 AAD00691; HOP1 AAC32262; POTH1 AAB41849; KNOX1a AAF32398; KNOX4 P56662; RS1TO3946; KNOX5 P56663; KNOX10 (*Zea mays*) P56667 ; KNOX11 P56668; LG3 AAD13611; LG4; KNAT3 P48000; KNAT4 P48001; BNHD1 P46606; THOX1 AAD09582; THOX2 AAD09583; LET12 0022300; KNAP3 004136; NTH23 BAA25921; OSH45 BAA08553; KNOX1 P56659; KNOX2 P56660; KNOX6 P56664. 79
- 4.5 The phylogenetic tree was drawn using the TREEVIEW software. Knotted like genes from the monocotyledonous species are in red, while the black typing indicates the *knotted-like* gene from dicotyledonous species. This tree clearly shows two classes of *KNOX* family genes, by which *OPKNI* is, included in the class I *Knotted* homeobox genes. 81
- 4.6 Phylogenetic relationship of *OPKNI* with other *Knotted* homeobox genes Protein sequences of the homeobox was used to align sequences for analysis using maximum parsimony as implemented in PAUP\* 4.0. This is a strict consensus of the most parsimonious trees (total length = 268, consistency index = 0.65, retention index = 0.89, rescaled consistency index = 0.59). Bootstrap analysis was performed with 100 replicates. Number along branches denotes bootstrap support of over 50%. 82
- 4.7 Genomic Southern blot analysis of *OPKNI*. Twenty microgram of oil palm genomic DNA was digested with 3 different enzymes (1, *KpnI*; 2, *EcoRI*; 3, *BamHI*) and probe with the full-length cDNA sequence of *OPKNI*. The size of DNA (kb) was indicated on the left of the figure. 85



- 4.8 RNA blot analysis of the expression of mRNAs in normal oil palm tissues that correspond to *OPKNI* clone. Each lane was loaded with 10µg of total RNA. The lower panel shows ethidium-bromide stained RNA corresponding to the blot on the top panel to illustrate the RNA loading levels. 87
- 4.9 RNA blot analysis of the expression of mRNAs in abnormal oil palm tissues that correspond to *OPKNI* clone. Each lane was loaded with 10µg of total RNA. The lower panel shows ethidium-bromide stained RNA corresponding to the blot on the top panel to illustrate RNA loading levels. 89
- 4.10 Diagram of a 3- months oil palm seedling, showing the upper and lower part of stem which were harvested for the isolation of total RNA. US, upper part of stem; LS, lower part of stem. 91
- 4.11 Ethidium bromide plate assay of *OPKNI* PCR products. PCR was performed using 25ng of synthesized cDNA from various oil palm tissues, 5µl of samples were removed at 20, 25, 30, 35,40 and 45 cycles and spotted onto the ethidium bromide plate. 92
- 4.12 *Cyclophilin* expression patterns in various tissues of oil palm. Top panel is PCR analysis of *Cyclophilin* expression. The PCR products were electrophoresed on 1.5% (w/v) agarose gel. Marker (DNA ladder mix, Fermentas) was loaded in lane 1. Agarose gel was blotted onto nylon membrane and hybridized with *Cyclophilin* probe as a control. Lower panel is the confirmation of specificity of semi-quantitative analysis. 94
- 4.13 *OPKNI* gene expression patterns in various tissues of oil palm. Top panel is PCR analysis of *OPKNI* expression. Twenty five cycles amplification was used to amplify the 3' UTR of *OPKNI* using gene specific primers. The PCR products were electrophoresed on 1.5% (w/v) agarose gel. Marker (DNA ladder mix, Fermentas) was loaded in lane 1. Agarose gel was blotted onto nylon membrane and hybridized with *OPKNI* gene specific probe. Lower panel is the confirmation of specificity of semi-quantitative analysis. 95
- 4.14 *OPKNI* expression in vegetative shoot apex of 3 month-old oil palm seedling grown in polybag. The tissue sections of A and B were hybridized with antisense probe. The blue arrowheads in A (20X magnification) and B (20X magnification) indicate the localization of *OPKNI* as described in the text. C (20X 98

magnification) and D (20X magnification) are the negative controls, hybridized with sense probe. Histology study of the tissue sections are shown in E (20X magnification) and F (20X magnification). cz, central zone; pz, peripheral zones; rz, rib zone; lp, leaf primordia; SAM, shoot apical meristem.

- 4.15 *OPKNI* expression in vegetative shoot apex of 3 month-old oil palm plantlet produced by tissue culture. The tissues sections of A and B were hybridized with antisense probe. The blue arrowheads in A and B (20X magnification) indicate the localization of *OPKNI*. C and D (20X magnification) are negative controls for A and B, respectively, hybridized with sense probe. Histology study of the tissues is shown in E and F (20X magnification). cz, central zone; pz, peripheral zones; rz, rib zone; lp, leaf primordia; SAM, shoot apical meristem; vt vascular tissues. 99
- 4.16 *OPKNI* expression in developing normal female floral tissues. A and C, the longitudinal and cross section of inflorescence of stage 4-6(10X magnification), respectively; B and D, the negative control for A and C, respectively; E and F, the longitudinal and cross section of stage 4 (20X magnification); G and H, the longitudinal and cross sections of stage 4 to 5 (20X magnification); I, the cross section of stage 5 to 6 (20X magnification); J, the longitudinal section of stage 6 to 7 (20X magnification); K and L, the longitudinal and cross section of stage 8 (20X magnification). The number in A, B, C and D indicated the stage of development of normal female flower. The positive signals are indicated by blue arrowheads. P, primordia; B, bract; Bl bracteole; F, staminate flower; Se, sepal; Pe, petal; C, carpel; St, stamen. 104
- 4.17 *OPKNI* expression in developing abnormal floral tissues. A and C, the longitudinal and cross section of inflorescence of stage 4 – 5 (10X magnification), respectively; B and D, the negative control for A and C, respectively; E (20X magnification) and F, (20X magnification), the longitudinal and cross section of stage 4 respectively; G, the cross section of stage 4 to 5; H, the cross section of stage 5; I and J, the longitudinal and cross section of stage 7- 8, respectively. The number in A and C indicated the stage of development of abnormal female flower. The positive signals are indicated by blue arrowheads. P, primordia; B, bract; Bl bracteole; F, staminate flower; Se, sepal; Pe, petal; C, carpel; Sc, supernumerary carpel; St, stamen; P, papillae; G, gynoeceium. 106

- 4.18 Comparison of *in situ* localization of *OPKNI* transcript in normal (A) and abnormal (B) female flower meristem tissue at the same stage (stage 4 to 5) of development. 20X magnification. P, primordia; Bl, bracteole. The positive signals are indicated by blue arrowhead. 107
- 4.19 *OPKNI* expression in developing normal male floral tissues. A (5X magnification) and C (10X magnification), the longitudinal sections of oil palm inflorescence of stage 3, and E, is its cross section (5X magnification); B, D and F, the negative control for A, C and E, respectively; G (5X magnification) and I (10X magnification), the longitudinal sections of stage 4 and, K (5X magnification) and M (10X magnification) show the cross sections of this stage; H,J,L and N, the negative control for G,I,K and M respectively; O, the longitudinal section of oil palm inflorescence showing stage 5, 6 and 7 of normal male flowers development (5X magnification); P, the negative control for O; Q, the higher magnification of stage 7 for O (20X magnification); R, the negative control for Q. The positive signals are indicated by blue arrowheads. P, flower primordia; B, bract; Bl, bracteole, Pe, petal; Stm, stamen; Ant, anther; 113
- 4.20 *OPKNI* expression in developing abnormal male floral tissues. A, C and D, the longitudinal sections of oil palm inflorescence of stage 3 with 5X, 10X and 20X magnification, respectively; B, the negative control for A; E, the cross sections of stage 3 and F, the negative control for E, G, I and J, the longitudinal sections of stage 4 with 5X, 10X and 20X magnification, respectively; H, the negative control for G; K, the cross sections of stage 4 and L, the negative control for K. The positive signals are indicated by blue arrowheads. P, primordia; B, bract; Bl, bracteole; Pe, petal. 116
- 4.21 Comparison of the expression level and the localization of *OPKNI* transcript in (A) normal and (B) abnormal male flower at stage 4 with 20X magnification and 10X magnification, respectively. The positive signals are indicated by pink arrowhead. P, primordia; Bl, bracteole. 117
- 5.1 Schematic representation of processes in plant development showing plants during the vegetative and reproductive phases of growth. The main shoot, lateral leaves and axillary shoot are derived from the shoot apical meristem. Only one lateral shoot is shown, developing in the axil of a leaf. During the transition to reproductive development, the shoot apical meristem becomes an inflorescence meristem. Flower development can be broken down into four major steps, step 1-4 of which each depending on the 129

function of certain genes. SAM, shoot apical meristem; IM, inflorescence meristem; b, bract; s, sepal; p, petal; st, stamen; c, carpel. (Adapted from Kalthoff, 1996, .579, Figure 23.13).

- 5.2 Schematic representation of *OPKNI* expression patterns during inflorescence development in oil palm based on northern analysis. The blue solid line indicates the trend of *OPKNI* expression during normal female flower development. The pink solid line indicates the trend of *OPKNI* expression during abnormal female flower development. The solid green line indicates the trend of *OPKNI* expression during normal male flower development, and the green dotted line indicates the *OPKNI* expression based on *in situ* hybridization during stage 3 in normal male flower. NM, normal male flower; NF, normal female flower; AbF, abnormal female flower. 139
- 5.3 Schematic representation of the expression patterns of *OPKNI* gene in different types of meristem. Arrows show the possibility of sharing the similarity in expression pattern of *OPKNI*. 148

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BCIP	-	5-bromo-4-chloro-3-indolyl phosphate
bp	-	basepair
kbp	-	kilobasepair
BSA	-	bovine serum albumin
cfu	-	colony forming unit
CTAB	-	hexadecyl (or cetyl) trimethyl ammonium bromide
dATP	-	deoxyadenine triphosphate
dCTP	-	deoxycytosine triphosphate
dTTP	-	deoxythymine triphosphate
dGTP	-	deoxyguanine triphosphate
ATP	-	adenine triphosphate
CTP	-	cytosine triphosphate
UTP	-	uracil triphosphate
GTP	-	guanine triphosphate
DEPC	-	diethyl pyrocarbonate
DIG	-	Digoxigenin
DMSO	-	dimethyl sulphoxide
DNA	-	deoxyribonucleic acid
cDNA	-	complementary deoxyribonucleic acid
DNase	-	nuclease
DTT	-	dithiothreitol
EDTA	-	ethylene diamine tetracetate
g	-	gram
mg	-	milligram
µg	-	microgram
HCl	-	hydrochloric acid
LB	-	Luria-Bertani
LiCl	-	lithium chloride
M	-	molar / molarity
mM	-	millimolar
µM	-	micromolar
MgSO <sub>4</sub>	-	magnesium sulfate
ml	-	milliliter
µl	-	microliter



N	-	Normality
NaCl	-	sodium chloride
NaOH	-	sodium hydroxide
NBT	-	nitroblue tetrazolium chloride
ng	-	nanogram
NTE	-	NaCl-Tris-EDTA
OD	-	optical density
PBS	-	phosphate buffer saline
PCR	-	Polymerase Chain Reaction
pfu	-	plaque forming unit
pmole	-	picomole
RNA	-	ribonucleic acid
mRNA	-	messenger ribonucleic acid
rRNA	-	ribosomal ribonucleic acid
RNase	-	ribonuclease
rpm	-	revolution per minute
RT	-	Reverse Transcriptase
SAAP	-	streptavidin-alkaline phosphatase conjugate
SDS	-	sodium dodecyl sulfate / sodium lauryl sulfate
SSC	-	standard saline citrate
TBS	-	tris buffer saline
TCA	-	trichloroacetic acid
TE	-	Tris-EDTA
Tris	-	tris[hydroxymethyl]aminomethane
Tris-HCl	-	tris hydrochloride
U	-	unit
UV	-	ultraviolet
V	-	volt
v/v	-	volume per volume
w/v	-	weight per volume
X	-	times
<i>OPKN1</i>	-	Oil palm <i>Knotted</i> homeobox gene
OPHb1	-	Oil palm homeobox1 partial cDNA clone

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

**“He who sees how things grow from the very beginning will have the finest view of them”**

**-Aristotle-**

How plants grow and propagate has been the subject of interest ever since human beings and plants bump into each other. This is spurred even further in the last few decades with the advances in molecular biology, leading to the development of sophisticated techniques in plant developmental study. Plants have two basic growth modes- vegetative growth and reproductive growth. Plants grow and develop new organs from a group of self-perpetuating cells called meristems, normally at the growing shoot tips and root tips through the process of growth and differentiation. This eventually will give rise to different mature structure- the meristemic cells at the root tip will produce the root structure, while those at the shoot tip will initially produce stem and leaves before growing the thorns, buds and flowers (Kerstetter and Hake, 1997). One of the most important questions in biology is about the molecular mechanism that underlies the developmental regulation of the shoot apical meristem, and the initiation and subsequent differentiation of lateral organs.



It has been discovered that homeodomain proteins are involved in controlling a range of developmental processes (Gehring *et al.*, 1994; Chan *et al.*, 1998; Williams, 1998). Homeodomains are protein segments of approximately 60 amino acid residues that are encoded by DNA fragments called homeobox (Otting *et al.*, 1990). Mutational and evolutionary analysis is beginning to pinpoint specific roles of homeobox gene in plant meristem function. Several reports have indicated that homeobox genes control pattern formation and determine morphological structure in multicellular eukaryotes including plants (Sundas-Larson *et al.*, 1998). Previous studies have shown that *Knotted* genes encode for homeodomain proteins. It was also recorded that this family of genes cause altered morphology in rice, maize, tobacco and *Arabidopsis* (Matsuoka *et al.*, 1993; Sinha *et al.*, 1993; Tamaoki *et al.*, 1997; Chuck *et al.*, 1996). These observations suggested that *Knotted* genes might be involved in the development and morphogenesis of plants.

The relationship between *Knotted* genes and abnormality in oil palm development has been the subject of considerable discussion. Oil palm is a major crop species producing high quality oil used in food. In this monocotyledonous species with a single apical meristem, clonal propagation through tissue culture has began as early as 1960s since vegetative propagation of elite adult palm has proved impossible. Although extensive research from the 1980s has been successful in setting up and optimizing large-scale tissue culture propagation, but until today it still face the problems due to the presence of vegetative abnormalities within the *in vitro* plantlets as well as flowering abnormality. To date, there is no fundamental understanding of the cause of the abnormality or the methods in how to prevent the abnormality from occurring (Kubis *et al.*, 2003).



Plant regeneration from *in-vitro*-cultured plant tissues generally involves proliferation of cells with defined developmental fates, therefore gene critical to cell division and development will likely be very useful in investigating the molecular mechanism of *in-vitro* plant (Frugis *et al.*, 1999). The objectives of this study were therefore; to isolate the full-length of *Knotted* gene from oil palm by screening an oil palm suspension culture cDNA library and to characterize this gene by studying the RNA or gene expression patterns in various tissues of oil palm using semi-quantitative PCR, northern blotting and *in situ* hybridization.

